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## UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

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### THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF CONVERSION IN INDIA

One of the pioneer subjects for investigation in the field of the psychology of religion was the phenomenon of conversion. In fact the earliest of the modern books in the field, namely that of Professor E. D. Starbuck which was published in 1899, is scarcely more than an examination of some of the data in connection with this particular problem. Other writers like Professor G. Stanley Hall, in his *Adolescence*, and Professor G. A. Coe in his *Psychology of Religion*, have given considerable attention to this phase of religious experience, the field of investigation being fairly largely confined to America.

Mr. E. A. Annett, of the Indian Sunday-school Union, has undertaken a study along similar lines in the Indian field.<sup>1</sup> In the introduction he acknowledges his debt to Dr. Starbuck, a debt which is patent to the reader at every stage of the study. To begin with, the author gives very meager evidence of any extended acquaintance with the literature and results of the psychological study of religion. For source material he follows two methods. The first is the biographical and autobiographical literature of Indian Christians supplemented by a few biographies of Hindus which record experiences in some sense analogous to conversion. The second source used is the experience of Indian Christians, descriptions of which the author has tried to obtain by means of a questionnaire.

It is scarcely necessary to be reminded of the limitations of the questionnaire method. One would search long for a more convincing argument for its failure than here. In the first place the list of the questions propounded indicates the workings of a consciousness far removed in its method of operation from the Indian. For example one question is: "What were your feelings at the time of your conversion?" Another is: "How differently did you feel toward persons, nature, or God?" The average Westerner who has been reared in a community where militant evangelism is practiced knows that there has been something in the training of the youth of the West to prepare them to expect emotional experiences of the type to which Mr. Annett refers. At the

<sup>1</sup> *Conversion in India: A Study in Religious Psychology*. By E. A. Annett. Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1920. xv+195 pages. Annas 14.

same time anyone familiar with Indian life knows that there is nothing analogous in Eastern experience. To be sure feeling is fuel for faith in India as elsewhere, but one who is expecting great and sudden outbursts of feeling, upsetting the whole view of life, is liable to disappointment.

One of the most insistent needs of the day is that those who desire to serve India religiously should appreciate the social psychology of the situation. Certainly the mind of the Indian is no *tabula rasa* awaiting impressions from foreign hands which seek to write upon it. It is rather the result of centuries of mystical culture which cares more for pretty figures than hard syllogisms and which has given expression to itself in a wealth of sacred literature. When one thinks about "Conversion in India," he must be ready to recognize the traditional cultural abyss that separates the whence from the whither of the subjects. The prophet of the new religion comes not to lives trained to the thoughts and emotions which he wants to arouse, but to thoughts and emotions perhaps of curiosity, perhaps of disdain, but certainly foreign. The sanctions of the old group are of a piece with its ancient pantheistic world-view, whereas those of the new group are derived from an ethical monotheism. In the face of these facts, he who expects sudden upheavals of religious consciousness and abrupt right-about-facing away from the traditional and toward the new, does so in the face of fearful odds.

In his introduction the author states that he secured "two thousand promises, many of them direct and personal," of answers to his list of questions, but that scarcely three hundred promises were made good. Could anything be more suggestive of the probability that the questions failed to elicit a better response than because there was nothing in the experiences of the questioned corresponding to the queries? I have gone over some of the leading questions, or all of them, with missionaries who are shepherding Christian communities numbering in the thousands, and in each case the criticism has been that these questions are suggestive of nothing in the experiences of their people. It is not too much to say that the seventeen hundred failures to answer are more significant for Indian religious experience than the three hundred actual responses. Indian Christians are scarcely so unreliable that 85 per cent of them would fail to redeem a promise made in good faith, if they were able. The fact is that questions about decisions, attitudes, motives, feelings, impulses, changes, disappointments, and the like demand a bit of psychological introspection quite beyond the grasp of the vast majority of the Indian Christian community.

There can be little doubt that some of the answers indicate the common fallacy of reflecting the thoughts and terminology of the questioner, as in the case in certain instance where alternative answers are suggested. As has been pointed out already, the whole discussion rests upon the supposition that the missionary ought to expect the sudden decisions which characterize adolescence in western lands and which the evangelist tries to bring about by some extraordinary appeal. There can be no doubt that many of the more educated Indian Christians are familiar with these ideas through western missionaries and literature. It is possible that in families which have been Christian for three or four generations there are such experiences. But in the majority of cases the attempt so to analyze the experience is forced and unreal. In India the line of demarkation is not one between the converted and the unconverted, but between the Hindu, the Muslim, the Jain, the Buddhist, and the Christian communities.

Ask any Indian of an established Christian family when he became a Christian (when he was converted), and you are likely to be told that he was born as such, since the family has been Christian for some generations. He is reared in the understanding that he is Christian from the beginning and is expected to conduct himself as such in a community where non-Christians are in the majority. And why should this not be a suggestion of value for Christian homes in the West? It is surely in more harmony with the spirit of Jesus than the fashion of teaching children that they are outside of the Christian fold until they experience a radical emotional upheaval.

Is there then such phenomenon as conversion in India? The answer is an emphatic affirmative, but the term connotes an experience that is typically Indian. The largest percentage of accessions to the church come from the Hindu community, and these "converts" have as the antecedent to their Christian experiences a social life that is the result of centuries of Hindu tradition. Those who come into the Christian church from the higher caste communities have a heritage of culture into which various strands have been interwoven including the illusory character of empirical life, the ultimate reality of the ideal, the absorption of the self in the corporate life of the group and of the universe, the impossibility of scientific knowledge and yet the necessity for super-sensual knowledge, emphasis on symbolism and ritualism in the attempt to give form and vitality to the shadowy concepts of the idealistic consciousness, together with many survivals of magic, tabu, animism, phallicism, and other practices of primitivity. Those who enter the

Christian community from the lower caste or non-caste groups have an inheritance of ideas, customs, and rites that is also composite, but partakes less of the rational and more of the ceremonial and magical. Indeed the social life of India is so sharply stratified, and the various communities so precisely demarked from one another both theoretically and practically, that it is quite impossible to give any general description in terms of a group consciousness that will be characteristic of all. Each concrete situation must be studied on its own merits, to determine the significance of the various constitutive elements of its life.

Conversion in India involves the process of gradually Christianizing a life with a background that may be characterized somewhat as above. It is quite as illogical to expect to up-root a man from his old Hindu cultural soil and transplant him in Christian soil without any preparation of either plant or soil, as it would be to up-root a banana tree from the tropics and transplant it in the frigid zone, expecting it to thrive. There is required a good deal of careful preparation, and constant nurture. Indian Christians do not spring up like mushrooms. They are the outcome of a gradual evolution.

Conversion in India is frequently a decidedly social phenomenon. Some experienced missionaries place no faith in its permanence unless it be so. When a whole village or a hamlet or any group which possesses a fair measure of solidarity decides after mature consideration that it will become identified with the Christian faith there is a strong probability that the movement will be stable. One cannot be certain in the case of isolated individuals. The social pull back to the old group life may prove too strong unless reinforced by a group of like-minded men. For that reason the mass movement so often the subject of unfriendly criticism has in the long run shown more evidence of genuineness and stability than has the work where isolated men have come. It is altogether a stupid misunderstanding of the social situation to speak of the fruitage of mass movements as "windfalls" and of the individual conversions as "picked fruit." The fact is that the so-called windfalls suffer much less from deteriorating bruises than do the misnamed picked fruit because they have a group sanction for their conversion which the others do not have.

Religious experiences of an intense and rapturous nature are not uncommon among Indians. The atmosphere of mysticism that characterizes Hinduism is well adapted to cultivate experiences of an ecstatic type. Indeed the religion of mysticism has a peculiar appeal to the Indian temperament. The literatures of India abound with accounts

of such experiences. From these Mr. Annett has selected a few which he uses as a basis for an attempt to prove that true satisfaction for this felt need can only be obtained through mystic union with the personal Jesus Christ. The placing of this chapter in his book must mean also that the author believes it lends strength to the expectancy of sudden religious upheavals culminating in a conversion to Christianity. Surely this biographical literature is immensely valuable as an unfolding of the operations of the Indian consciousness when it is dealing with the religious life and gives us suggestions as to a warm type of faith and piety which we may expect from our Indian brothers. But the connection between these experiences and the phenomenon of conversion seems to be neither logical nor psychological. We are getting a much more scientific treatment of this literature in those volumes of *The Heritage of India Series* which deal with the various Indian literatures.

There is no field in the world that offers a more bewitching and yet bewildering scope for the psychological examination of religious experience than India. The seriousness of the people toward religious problems is compelling. The multiplicity and multiformity of beliefs and rites are appalling. The chasms between the high and the low, and the apparent contradictions are confusing. Yet for the psychologist the field may be almost described as virgin. It would be of immense value for the progress of Christianity in India if every missionary were trained in the groundwork of social psychology.

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